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Featuring "TRAIL of the LONELY GUN"

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TRAIL OF THE LONELY GUN

by Les Savage Jr.

MEN IN BUCKSKIN

by Brett Austin

All characters are entirely fictitious and no reference is intended to any person living or dead.

Vickers had never seen Sherry Kern. But he wanted her. So he followed her danger trail—into an Apache village that promised a horror death to any paleface who dared enter. He defied redskin wrath, schemed and fought to save her—knowing that if he did she would swear him to the gallows.

TRAIL OF THE LONELY GUN

By Les Savage, Jr.

WHEN THE sound came, Johnny Vickers stiffened, and the lever on his sixteen-shot Henry snicked softly to the pull. Moonlight coming in the doorway of the miner's shack fell meagrely across his face, its upper half obliterated by the solid black shadow laid across it beneath the brim of his flat-topped hat, his long unshaven jaw thrusting forward in a habitual aggression that drew his lips thin under the aquiline dominance of his nose. The collar of his alkali-whitened denim coat was turned up around the sunburned column of his neck, and his legs were long and saddle-drawn in sweat-stiff Ute leggins with greasy fringe down their seams. Across the gurgle of Granite Creek and on down Thumb Butte Road, he could see Prescott's lights glowing yellow in the soft blackness of Arizona's August night.

"Kern?" he said.

"No, Vickers," the man outside answered. "Perry Papago. I'll come in, si?"

The half-breed's figure blotted light from the square dimness of the door momentarily; then he was inside, bending forward slightly as if to peer at Johnny Vickers. In the shadows, Papago's pock-marked face was barely visible to Vickers. He had on nothing but a pair of dirty chivarras and a short leather vest, and his shoulders were smooth and coppery against the dim glow from outside. Vickers marked the three pounds of Remington .44 still in Papago's holster before he spoke.

"You took a chance walking in like that."

"I didn't know it was so bad," said Papago, and his eyes were taking in the acrid rigidity of Vickers' figure. "But I guess I'd be pretty spooky, too, if I'd been hiding out on a murder charge for over a month. They don't give you much peace, do they, Vickers? I hear Deputy Calavaras almost had you last week up in Combabis."

"Never mind," said Vickers.

"Why did you kill Edgar James, really, Vickers?" said Papago. "He was such a nice young man. Just because you and him were rival editors—"

"He was a swilling rumpot who thought he could find out everything that went on in Arizona Territory by sitting on his hocks in front of that two-bit Courier and—" Johnny Vickers stopped, breathing hard, trembling with the effor of holding all the bitterness of this last month in him. Finally he spoke between his teeth. "I told you never mind."

"But I will mind," said Perry Papago. "I always liked you, Vickers. If there's one square man with the Indians in Prescott, you're it. Your editorials stopped more than one Indian war from starting. The Moquis at Walpi won't be quick to forget how that Christmas article you wrote kept them from starving in 'seventy-four." His voice had lost its former mockery. "We don't blame you for killing James. He bucked every decent thing you tried to do for the Indians. That's why I'm here, Vickers. Any other man, we wouldn't care, but you always played square with us, and we don't want you to get in any bigger than you already sit. We don't want you to do that."

"Hold still, so I can see your face when I blow your brains out!"

Vickers moved faintly, the Henry scraping against his Levi coat. "Don't want me to do what?"

"I know you're here to meet Judge Kern," said Papago. "Do you know why he wanted you?"

"I know something's happened to his daughter," said Vickers.

"The Apaches got Sherry Kern," said Papago. "The Judge wants you to get her back."

The irony of that almost drew a laugh from Vickers. "Why me?" he said finally.

"Because you're his last card," said Papago. "You know Indians like nobody else does around here, and you're the only one who might be able to reach them without endangering Sherry Kern's life. They took her off the Butterfield stage between here and Tucson, killed the other passengers, burnt the coach. About a week later, Kern was contacted. You know four companies of dragoons were just moved from Tucson up here to Prescott. Kern was given till the end of August to have those troops moved back, or his daughter would be returned to him dead."

"And Kern thinks it's Apaches?" said Vickers. "What about the Tucson machine? You know how Prescott and Tucson have been fighting for twelve years to see which one becomes the seat of the Territorial capital. The legislature's convened in Tucson these past three years, and the Tucson Machine gotten fat on the plum of having it in their town. The movement of these troops to Prescott undoubtedly means the capital's being shifted too. If the legislature starts convening up here again, the balance of power will shift back to Kern's party, and the Tucson Machine will be washed up. You know the Machine would do anything to keep that from happening. If they could force those troops back to Tucson, they'd have a big start in keeping the capital there. No legislature's going to meet anywhere in this Territory without the protection of the military."

"You're loco," said Papago. "The Tucson Machine doesn't have anything to do with this. You know those dragoons were sent up here by the Department of Arizona as an opening campaign against the northern Apaches. Crook's through with the Tontos, and he's coming up here, that's all. The Apaches just took this way to stop it. Forget the Tucson Machine. Forget everything. Just get out of here and don't have anything to do with Kern!"

"I'd rather see the judge first."

"You won't go?"

"I don't think so."

Papago's hand was stiff, now, and he seemed to incline his short, square torso forward perceptibly. "There are other ways of stopping you besides asking you."

Vickers' big Henry lifted slightly till its bore covered the belt buckle of Navajo silver glittering against Papago's belly. "Go ahead," he said, "if you want to."

"I don't have to," said Papago, and his gaze shifted over Vickers' shoulder. "All right, Combabi, you take his Henry."

"No, Combabi," said someone else from behind Vickers, "you leave his Henry right where it is."

Vickers stood tense till he heard the movement behind him, then shifted so he could see without taking his gun off Papago. There was no rear door to this old miner's shack, but the roof above the room had caved in, pulling part of the log wall in with it. Combabi must have slipped through the opening while Papago and Vickers were talking; it would have taken a full-blooded Indian to do it without Vickers hearing. Combabi crouched there now, surprise in the tensity of his body, if not in the dark enigma of his hook-nosed face; something frustrated about the way he gripped the big dragoon cap-and-ball in both dirty hands. The man above Combabi on what was left of the decaying log wall had pulled the tails of his pin-striped cutaway up about his lean shanks in order to get there, and a hairy old beaver hat sat like a black stovepipe on his head. The faint glow from the town's lights caught

his snowy burnsides and luxurious moustaches.

"Kern!" said Vickers. "Looks like we have a potfull tonight."

"Getting right spry in my old age," grunted Judge Thomas Kern, lowering himself gingerly from the wall with the four-barrelled pepperbox still very evident in one slender hand. He waved the ugly little gun at Combabi. "Put away your smokebox and get on inside."

Combabi moved like a snake, without apparent effort, or sound. He shoved the dragoon back in its tattered black holster and got to his feet and moved around Vickers sullenly till he stood near Papago, his shifty eyes glittering in the light of the moon filtering into the shack.

"Sorry to be late, Vickers," said Kern, pulling his coat back to stuff the pepperbox in a pocket of his white marseille waistcoat. "Guess it's just as well, though, I saw this here Indian sneaking in through that hole at the back and I decided I'd better see what the arrangements were. He just sat there listening to you talk, so I thought I might as well hear a little of the confabulation, too. Oddly enough, Papago was right about this not being the Tucson Machine. I'll admit it fits in with their aims rather fortuitously, but I've had an investigator in Tucson a long time now, and I'd take his word on it, and he says no."

Judge Kern stopped, something coming into his eyes as he stared at Vickers. There was a fierce pride in Kern's high-browed, eagle-beaked face that held him from any display of emotion. It was probably the only evidence Vickers would ever get of what this meant to the judge. He could sense all the hell the old man must have been through these last days. Then the sympathy was blotted out by the other emotions Vickers had felt toward Kern throughout the preceding weeks. Kern saw it in his face and caught his hard arm.

"I know, Vickers, I know. I've hounded and hunted you and driven you like an animal this last month, and you don't owe me anything. But you know how close I was to Edgar James. He was like my own son. You couldn't blame a person for wanting the man caught who murdered his own son. You don't know what it took for me to contact you like this, and come to you. But you're my last hope. You're the only man with enough friends among the Indians around here to do any good. We can't make a move with the troops. If we so much as sent a vedette out of town, I'd be afraid the Apaches would kill Sherry. I'm not asking you to do this from the goodness of your heart, Vickers. I'll promise you amnesty if you get my daughter back. Enough amnesty for you to come back into Prescott and start your paper again, if you want it. Anything, Vickers, anything."

Vickers turned his lean mordant face down a moment. "Mogollon Kid?" he said finally.

"I don't know who took her," said Kern, desperation leaking into his voice. "I though you'd know."

"I don't," said Vickers. "I don't even know who the Mogollon Kid is. Nobody does, I guess, any more than they know who bosses the Tucson Machine."

Kern grasped his hard arm. "You will help me, Vickers?"

"No," said Papago, and Vickers whirled toward him, realising how engrossed they had become in talking, "Vickers won't help you, or anybody," and it had given Papago the chance to take his jump, knocking aside Vickers' Henry before he could bring it into line, pulling his own Remington at the same time.

Instead of fighting to get the Henry back on Papago, Vickers let it go and threw himself bodily into the man. They met with a fleshy thud, Vickers clutching desperately to turn Papago's gun down as the half-breed cleared leather with it. Behind him, Vickers heard Kern grunt, and thought, Combabi, and then the Remington exploded, jarring Vicker's hand up, the slug hitting earth near enough to Vickers to numb his foot with the impact.

With his free hand, Papago slugged at Vicker's face. Senses reeling

with the blow, Vickers stumbled backward and tripped on a body, almost going down. He caught the white head of Judge Kern at his feet, and fighting to stay erect, still holding Papago's gun-hand with one fist, he caught Papago by the belt with his other, swinging the man around. Combabi must have pistol-whipped Kern down, for he was just straightening above the judge and his gun was rising towards Vickers. Swung off-balance, Papago smashed into Combabi that way. Combabi grunted, and the whole shack rocked as he was knocked back against the wall.

Vickers still had hold of Papago by the belt and gun. Papago gasped with the effort of smashing Vickers in the face again with his free hand, lips peeled away from his white teeth in animal rage. Vickers took that blow, and set himself, and heaved, releasing both his holds on the man.

Combabi was just reeling groggily away from the wall, trying to line up his dragoon again. Papago staggered back into him. They both crashed into the wall and fell to the floor in a tangle of legs and arms. Papago rolled free of Combabi, cursing, and tried to rise. Vickers was already jumping for him, feet first. One moccasin caught Papago in the jaw, knocking his head back against the wall, and again the frame structure shuddered, and dirt showered from the sod roof. Vickers' other foot caught Papago's gun-hand, knocking the Remington free. Shouting with pain, Papago tried to rise, but Vickers caught him again in the face with a moccasin. More dirt showered down on them and Vickers whirled to catch Combabi before the man could rise. The Indian had dropped his cap-and-ball when Papago fell back against him, and Vickers pulled him up by his long greasy hair and smashed his head against the wall with it.

"Pichu-quate!" shouted Combabi, and his hoarse voice was drowned by the rocking shudder of the building, and then a louder noise. Vickers released the man's hair and jumped backward with earth rattling on to his shoulders.

Just trying to rise from the wall, shaking his head dazedly, Papago was caught in the downpour of sod and timbers as the roof caved in. Vickers saw a rotten beam collaspe, one broken end crashing into Papago. Combabi threw himself forward with his eyes shut and his face contorted in fear. Then both men disappeared in the avalanche of brown earth.

Vickers bent to catch Judge Kern under the armpits and haul him out through the door; then he stopped, realising the rattling thunder had ceased. Only the far end of the shack had caved in. Kern began groaning and shaking his head dully.

"Danged Indian gave me the barrel of that cap-and-ball."

"Think we ought to pull them out?" said Vickers.

Kern rose unsteadily to his feet, staring at the pile of earth and timbers at the other end of the room, then glanced at Vickers, and his eyes began to twinkle, and he guffawed: "I guess we better, Vickers. The varmints don't deserve it, but I might lose a night's sleep if I had it on my conscience, and Papago ain't worth a night's sleep to me."

Combabi's arm was sticking out of the dirt, and he was still conscious when they pulled him free, choking and gasping. Papago took longer to reach, and revive. Even after he came around, he lay there where they had dragged him outside, breathing faintly, staring up at them with his enigmatic eyes. Slowly, those eyes took on a smoldering opacity, and when he finally rose to his feet, his breathing had become guttural and rasping. Vickers punched the shells from his Remington and handed it back.

Papago glanced at the gun, slipped it back in its holster, and his voice trembled slightly with his effort at control. "You're going after Sherry Kern?"

"What do you think?" said Vickers.

"You're going after Sherry Kern." It was a statement this time. Papago turned toward his horse, hitched to some mesquite at the side, and Combabi followed him, mounting the roach-backed dun beside Papa-

One of the diamondbacks slithered directly toward Sherry.

go's pinto. Papago lifted a leg up, and then, with his foot in the stirrup, and one hand gripping his saddle-horn, he turned to look at Vickers again, and there was an indefinable menace in his flat, toneless voice. "You're a fool, Vickers. You think you had a lot of men looking for you this last month? It wasn't nothing. It wasn't nothing compared to what you'll be bucking if you do this. Judge Kern didn't have to swear out any warrant for your arrest. You've signed your own. And it ain't just for your arrest, Vickers. It's your death warrant!"

CHAPTER TWO

UP IN the Tortillas the heat struck like this in August, about an hour after sunrise, and there was no breeze to dry the beaded sweat on the hairy little roan standing there in the coulee where bleeding heat lay crimson against the black lava.

Vickers had rolled himself a cigarette and hunkered down with his back against a boulder so he could see both upslope and down, his Henry in his lap. Three days of riding were behind him from Prescott, and he had unsaddled the weary bronc completely to rest it. His pale blue eyes took on a gunmetal color in his Indian-dark face, moving deliberately across the slope below him, and his lank blond hair hung in a sweat-damp cowlick down his gaunt forehead. He gave no sign when the rider came into view. He sat moveless, waiting for the man to rise through the scrubby yuccas down there.

When the rider would have passed him, going on up, Vickers stood without speaking and waited. The man's head turned abruptly, then he necked his big horse around and dropped into the shallow cut Vickers occupied. He stopped the horse and leaned forward in the centrefire rig to peer wide-eyed at Vickers. He was a short, square bulldog of a man with heavy jowls and a mop of russet hair that grew unruly down the middle of his head and receded at his temples above ears like a pair of small pink cauliflowers.

"Vickers?" he said. He got down off the horse with a springy ease for his compact bulk, fishing a cigar from inside his short-skirted black coat. "Webb Fallon. The Apache told me you'd be hereabouts this morning. You running in Kern's team now?"

Vickers took a last puff on his cigarette, studying the cold relentlessness of Fallon's opaque brown eyes, then dropped the fag and ground it out with a scarred wooden heel. "Kern said you'd picked up a few things on Sherry."

The name sent something indefinable through Fallon's face, and he didn't speak at once. "I'm glad you're in it," he said finally. "The judge told me he'd try and get you as a last resort. I have found one or two things." He got a leather whang from his pocket. It was worn and greasy, about four inches long. "This for instance."

"Looks like the fringe off someone's leggins."

"That's right," said Fallon, and let his eyes drop to Vickers' leggins. "Sherry Kern had a handful of them. They came off the leggins of the man who murdered Edgar James."

For a moment their gazes locked, and Vickers could feel the little muscles twitch tight about his thin mouth, drawing the skin across his high cheekbones till it gleamed. Meeting his gaze enigmatically, Fallon went on.

"It was one of the pieces of evidence Judge Kern was going to use against you at the trial. Edgar James must have been close enough to rip it off the murderer's pants. Sherry was the first one to reach Edgar there on Coronado before he died, and he still had this bunch of fringe in his hand. Sherry had kept it in her possession, and when this turned up, it had some significance for me. As you know, I've been Kern's agent down here some time, trying to uncover the Tucson Machine. One of the Mexicans I've befriended came into Tucson Sunday before last, said a bunch of Apaches with a woman had stopped at his place for food and remounts. They burned his

jacal and took what horses he had, but he managed to escape into the timber. I went back to his place with him. Found this by the well."

"You think she's trying to leave a trail?" said Vickers.

"It's like her," said Fallon, and that same nameless expression crossed his face as when Vickers had said her name before, stronger this time. For a moment Fallon seemed to be looking beyond Vickers. Then, with a visible effort, he brought his eyes back to the man. "You never knew Sherry, did you?"

"Never saw her," said Vickers. "She arrived at Prescott from Austin the night Edgar James was killed."

"You put it nicely."

"Never mind."

"You can admit it to me," said Fallon. "I'm strictly neutral."

Vickers' voice grew thin. "I said never mind."

Fallon's voice held a faint shrug. "All right. So you didn't murder Edgar James. And Sherry Kern came in the night he was killed, and you haven't ever seen her."

"She look anything like the judge?" asked Vickers, feeling the animosity that had dropped between them.

"The pride," said Fallon, and again he was looking beyond Vickers, and that same thing was in his face. Vickers could almost read it now, but could not yet believe it, somehow, in a man like Fallon. "Yes, the pride." Fallon jerked out of it abruptly, waving his hand in a frustration at having let Vickers see it. "Black-haired, black-eyed," he said matter-of-factly, "five-six or seven. Big girl. Yes, quite a bit like the judge." He seemed to realise he hadn't used his cigar and bit off the end almost angrily, spitting it out. Then he waved the leather whang. "Think this will do us any good?"

"If she's leaving those for a trail," said Vickers, "it might do us a lot of good."

"Glad you think so," said Fallon. "This was just a lucky strike and it's left me up against the fence. I don't have your touch with the Indians. The gate's closed to me."

"We'll have to do a sight of riding," said Vickers.

"I imagine," said Fallon.

The Painted Desert extended three hundred miles along the north bank of the Little Colorado, caprices of heat and light and dust changing the hues constantly, a scarlet haze that splashed the horizon shifting unaccountably into a serried mist of purples and greys from which warmly tinted mesas erupted and knolls of reddish sandstone thrust toward the sky. Dust-caked and slouching wearily in the saddles of plodding horses, the two men rose from the brackish water of the river toward Hopi Buttes, standing darksome and lonely against the weird sunset sky. All afternoon now Vickers had been scanning the ground, and finally he found what he had been seeking. He halted his horse, dismounted to study the mound of bluish rocks, topped by a flat piece of sandstone upon which were placed a number of wooden ovals, painted white and tufted with feathers.

Fallon removed the inevitable cigar from his mouth. "What is it?"

"Eagle shrine," muttered Vickers. "The ovals represent eggs. Probably made them during the Winter Solstice Ceremony as prayers for an increase in the eagles. Moquis figure the eagle is the best carrier of prayers to the rain-bringing gods. We should find some boys trapping eagles near here for their annual rain dance."

"You really know, don't you," said Fallon.

Vickers got on his pied horse. "Where do you think I've been living this last month?"

Fallon moved his animal after Vickers, twisting in the saddle. "Got a funny feeling. Ever get it out here?"

"You mean about being followed?"

Fallon turned sharply toward him. "Then it ain't just a feeling."

"There was dust on the rim this morning."

"You even got eyes like an Indian," grunted Fallon. "Who do you figure? Apaches?"

"We haven't made a move the In-

dians don't know about," said Vickers. "It might be them."

"Or someone else?"

"You should know about that," said Vickers.

"How do you mean?" asked the man.

"Doesn't the kidnapping of Sherry Kern by the Indians seem a little too fortuitous, when the Tucson Machine would give anything to keep the capital from being moved back to Prescott?" asked Vickers.

"It does. But why should I know —" Suddenly it seemed to strike Fallon, and his face darkened. "I don't like your insinuation, Vickers. I've been working for Judge Kern for a long time."

"And you told him it wasn't the Tucson Machine that kidnapped Sherry."

Fallon booted his mare in the flank suddenly, jumping it into Vickers' horse so hard the roan stumbled, grabbing Vickers by the shoulder to pull him around and catch at the front of his Levi jacket. There was a driving strength in Fallon's fist that held Vickers there momentarily, and the man's wide eyes stared into Vickers'.

"Listen, Vickers, I want to get one thing straight. I still think you're a murderer, and I don't trust you any more than you trust me, but I'm not going to have you insinuating I have any connection with the Tucson Machine. Nobody knows who runs the Machine any more than they know who the Mogollon Kid is—"

It was Vickers who stopped Fallon. He tore the man's hand off his Levi jacket and shoved it down toward their waists. Fallon gave one jerk, trying to free it, and then stopped, held there more by Vickers' blazing eyes than his grip.

"And I'm tired of being called a murderer, Fallon," said Vickers, through his teeth, "and if you still want to do it, you'd better go for your gun!"

The Moquis built their eagle traps of willow shoots and deerhide, baiting them with rabbits and concealing themselves inside, waiting to seize the eagles that pounced on the prey, and Vickers and Fallon came across a trap on a flat atop Hopi Buttes. Another man might have been sullen or touchy after a clash like the one Vickers and Fallon had experienced, but Kern's agent sat enigmatically on his mare watching the Indian youth emerge from the trap, no expression in his wide eyes.

The Moqui boy was lean and drawn as a gaunted bronc, his black hair cut straight across his brow and hanging to his shoulders behind, wearing no more than a buckskin loin cloth and a pair of dirty, beaded moccasins.

"Buenas dias, Senor Vickers," he said.

"Buenas dias, Quimiu," said Vickers, speaking in Spanish. "You have grown since I last saw you at Sichomovi."

Quimiu nodded his head in a pleased way without allowing much expression to appear on his face. "You are hunting birds too?" he asked in Spanish.

"One bird," said Vickers. "A female bird with a black head?"

"That is a rare bird," Quimiu told him. "Even more rare if she sheds her plumage in August."

"There was a Hopi down on the Little Colorado who said one of the eagle trappers up here found a feather of that plumage," said Vickers.

Gravely the boy untied a leather whang from his G string, handing it to Vickers. "You know I would show it to no other white man."

Vickers passed it to Fallon, and the man compared it with the other whang he had gotten, nodding. "Couldn't miss it. No Apaches dye their leggins like that. First bunch of Ute fringe I've seen in the Territory in years." He glanced at Vickers' leggins. "Couldn't miss it."

Vickers drew a thin breath, forcing his eyes to stay on the Indian. "How did the bird fly?"

"Proudly. They must have been riding for days when they passed south of Hopi Buttes, but she still sat straight in the saddle without any fear in her face. Her hair was black as midnight and long and straight

like an Indian maiden. I saw their dust from here and went down to find out what it was. They didn't see me. There must have been a dozen Apaches——" here the traditional hatred of the Pueblo Indian for the nomad Apache entered his voice—"and the bird you seek rode behind the leader. She must have fought them, for there were scratches on her face, and her hands were tied, but they had not subdued her."

"Nothing could," said Fallon, and his eyes had that far-away look again, and this time Vickers realised what it was. He had not been able to believe it before, in Fallon. But the same thing was in Quimiu's face, now, and Quimiu's description had made the picture of Sherry Kern more vivid in Vickers' mind; that picture had been forming a long time now, ever since he left Prescott, part of it gleaned from the judge or snatches he found on the way to his meeting with Fallon, some from Fallon himself, now from Quimiu. Vickers could almost see her now, riding proud and unsubdued in her captivity, her eyes gleaming fiercely, her statuesque body straight and unyielding after a ride that would have exhausted another white woman to the point of collapse. And something else was beginning to form in his mind, or in some other part of him he couldn't name, and it gave him a better comprehension of her capacity to stir other men, or more than stir them. He turned in his saddle to glance at Judge Kern's agent. Yes, even a man like Fallon. Even a cold, passionless man like Webb Fallon.

Then Vickers turned back to Quimiu. "Do you know where they have taken her?"

Quimiu shook his head. "The eagles have some eyries even the Hopi does not know of. There in a Navajo shaman near Canon Diablo who knows where the birds sleep when the moon rises. I have caught many eagles on his advice."

"Perhaps we had better go there," said Vickers.

"Perhaps you had better not," said a hoarse voice from behind them. "Perhaps you had better stay right there so I can see what your face looks like when I blow your brains out."

The wind sighing across Hopi Buttes blew cold against the sweat which had broken out on Vickers' brow. His first instinct had been to pull his Henry up from where he held it across his saddle bows. He had stopped his hand from moving with an effort. Finally his rig creaked beneath him as he turned.

Vickers wouldn't have believed a white man could come up on them like that without giving himself away. This one had. He sat on a rim of the sandstone uplift behind them, a huge grinning man with a hoary black beard and a shaggy mane of hair on his hatless head, a ponderous Harper's Ferry percussion pistol in each freckled hand.

"Well, Red-eye," said Fallon, "you selling whisky to the Moquis now?"

"I sell it to any man which buys," said Red-eye Reeves. He had on a pair of moccasins and his frayed leggins of buckskin were pulled on over long red flannels which sufficed for his shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows of his hairy forearms. He waved a .58 Harper's Ferry at Vickers. "The Tucson Machine has a price of five hundred dollars on your head. What would you give me not to collect that price?"

It galled Vickers to bargain for his life that way, but there was nothing else, with those huge percussions in his face. "How much do you want?"

"I didn't say how much. I said what."

"Well."

"You're travelling this country hunting Sherry Kern," said Red-eye. "You'll hit a lot of Injun camps. Navajo, Apache, Moqui. I got a load of red-eye that would bring fifty dollars the quart from them redskins. I never been able to reach them before. You're the only one could take me into Tusuyan and bring me back out again with my scalp still above my beard."

"And after they get through swilling your rotgut they'll have a war dance and pull a massacre somewhere while they're drunk," said Vickers. "The only reason I could take you into Tusuyan is the Indians

are my friends. You think I'd do that to them?"

Red-eye Reeves waved the Harper's Ferry again. "This is your alternative, and it's sort of a jumpy one, so you'd better decide right quick."

Vickers took a heavy breath, speaking finally. "We're heading for a Navajo shaman in Canon Diablo."

"Suits me," said Red-eye Reeves "He'll be good for a gallon, at least."

They rode westward from Hopi Buttes, Red-eye Reeves forking a ratty little Mexican packmule and leading a dozen others, aparejos piled high with flat wooden kegs of whisky. All day Reeves kept pulling at a bottle, and it was evident he had been doing the same before he came on Vickers and Fallon. He reeled tipsily in his saddle, mumbling through his beard sometimes. They were riding through a scrubby motte of juniper east of Canon Diablo when Vickers drew far enough ahead for Fallon to speak without being overheard.

"You aren't going through with this?"

"I'll get rid of him as soon as I can," said Vickers.

"Be careful," Fallon told him. "He's drunk most of the time, but he's dangerous. I don't think his real purpose in wanting to come with us is the whisky."

Vickers glanced at Fallon, pale eyes narrow. "Is he from Tucson?"

"He's been there," said Fallon.

It was a shot, then, cutting off what Vickers had started to say. His roan shied and spooked, starting to buck and squeal, and Vickers threw himself from the horse while he still had enough control over his falling to roll and come up running, the back of his Levi coat ripped where he had gone through some jumping cholla. "Come back here, you cross-eyed cousin to a ring-tailed varmint," yelled Red-eye Reeves from somewhere behind Vickers, and Vickers saw a mule galloping away with wooden kegs spilling in its wake from the dragging aparejo pack.

Then it was out of earshot for Vickers, and he had thrown himself in the monkshood carpeting the ground near the edge of the grove. He lay there in the heady fragrance of the wildflowers, peering toward the mesa ahead of them. The slope was gentle at first, littered with boulders and scrubby timber, then steepened to a veritable cliff, channeled by erosion. Vickers jumped at the movement behind him.

"Never mind," said Fallon, and he crawled on in with an old Theurs conversion-model Colt. "It looks like we won't have to worry about getting rid of Red-eye. He's taking care of that himself."

Still yelling, Reeves had chased his scattering pack train out into the open beyond them, kicking his scraggly mule after a trio of pack animals that had headed up the slope. He was well on to the rising ground when the shot rang out. His riding mule stumbled, and Reeves went over its head, landing on both feet and running on up the slope with his momentum, and both Harper's Ferry guns were in his hands before he stopped.

"Come on out then, you misbegotten brother to a spotted nimny and a clubfooted jackass. Nobody can treat my babies like that. Nobody can shoot my—"

His own shot cut him off, and Vickers couldn't help exclaiming, because he hadn't seen anybody up there, and he wouldn't have believed a man could do that with an old percussion pistol.

"I told you he was dangerous," Fallon muttered.

Higher up, a man had risen out of the rocks where he must have been crouched. Both his hands were at his chest, and he stood there a moment as if suspended. Then he fell forward, rolling out over the sandstone and coming to a stop against some stunted juniper. Shouting hoarse obscenities, Red-eye Reeves charged on up the slope. There was something terrible about his giant, black-bearded figure running inexorably on upward like that, and somehow Vickers wasn't surprised to see a man rise farther on up and turn to run. Red-eye had raised his other Harper's Ferry when the third figure appeared, much nearer, climbing to a rock and holding both hands up, palms toward Reeves. The drunk

whisky drummer shifted his pistol with a jerk till it bore on that third man. Fallon must have realised it about the same time Vickers did, because he jumped out of the monkshood, shouting.

"Reeves, don't, can't you see he—"

Vickers' shot drowned his voice. The pistol leaped from Reeves' hand, and he yelled in agony, taking a stumbling step forward and pulling the hand in toward him. Fallon turned back to Vickers, his mouth open slightly, and Vickers realised it would take a lot for Fallon to show that much surprise.

Reeves was holding out his bloody, shattered hand when they reached him, studying it with a speculative look to his pursed mouth, and he looked up and grinned at them. "I didn't think those old Henry's could go that far," he said.

Vickers looked for guile in his face, unwilling to believe the man held no anger at him for shooting the gun from his hand, but could find none. "Didn't you see that man wanted to surrender?"

"What do I care," said Red-eye, going to pick up his gun and stuffing it in his belt. "The only good Injun's a dead one to me, and I don't care how my lead catches them, with their hands up, or wrapped around a gun."

Fallon looked at Vickers, then shrugged. "You go and get him, I'll see what we can do for Red-eye's hand."

"The hell with that," growled Red-eye, wiping his bloody hand against his shirt the way a man would do if he had scratched it. "Think one those damn Henry flattics can do any more'n pink a man? It takes one of these babies—" he patted his pistol—"and you'll see what I mean when you find that varmint I pegged higher up. I'm going to get a drink."

He walked off toward a group of his mules where they had finally stopped up on the slope. The Indian who had surrendered was making his way down to them, a gnarled ancient in tattered deerskin covered with dung and other filth till his stench preceded him a good dozen yards. His watery eyes took some time to focus on them, from the seamed age of his face, and then he held up a palsied claw of a hand, and the single word relegated them to their station, holding neither contempt nor respect.

"Pahanas," he said. "White man."

Vickers realised this must be the shaman Quimiu had spoken of. "There was a youth of the Hopitu-shinumu named Quimiu in the eagle-trapping grounds of Hopi Buttes who told us of a wonder worker at Canon Diablo who was in communion with the Trues," said Vickers.

The Trues were the gods of the Pueblos, and though nothing showed in the shaman's face, there was a subtle change to the tone of his voice. "You must be blessed by the Trues. Quimiu would not have sent white men to me otherwise. I shall then thank you for saving me from the two Apaches who were holding me."

He waved his hand toward the Indian Red-eye had shot. The second one had disappeared over the lip of the mesa, and as Vickers moved up to examine the dead one, Reeves came in leading his pack animals. The ball had taken the Indian through the chest, apparently killing him instantly. He had on a pair of Apache war moccasins of buckskin, really boots that were hip length, turned down until they were only knee high, forming a protection of double thickness against the malignant brush of the southwest. About his flanks he wore a G string and a buckskin bag of powder and shot for his Sharps buffalo gun. Squatting over him, Vickers saw the odd expression catch at Reeves' face.

"Know him?" said Vickers.

Reeves nodded, his drunken humor suddenly gone. "That's Baluno. He rode with the Mogollon Kid."

CHAPTER THREE

THE shaman's "hoganda" was up on the mesa, overlooking Canon Diablo which formed the other side, a deep chasm of Kaibab sandstone, yellow at the top and fading into a salmon color as it descended. Vickers had borrowed one of Reeves' mules to

round up his spooked roan, and he dismounted from the skittish horse now, loosening the cinch to blow the animal.

"What were those Apaches doing here?" he asked the Navajo.

"Holding me hostage," said the shaman evasively.

"He'll never tell you anything unless you get him inside that hoganda," said Redeye, "and you know they won't let a white man in their medicine house."

Vickers held out his hand so the scar showed across his palm. "I am blood brother to Abeito, the House Chief of Walpi."

"You must be the one who saved him from the pahanas near Tucson last year," said the shaman enigmatically.

Vickers shrugged, seeing it had done no good, as Abeito was a Moqui, and this man a Navajo. "The white men blamed him for something Apaches did."

Red-eye put his good hand on the butt of a Harper's Ferry. "We ain't getting nowhere this away. Look, you dried-up old——"

"Never mind, Reeves," Vickers hadn't said it very loud, but it stopped the man. Then Vickers moved closer to the shaman, speaking softly. "I know of Shi-pa-pu."

It was the first expression the shaman had allowed to enter his face, and it caught briefly at his mouth and eyes before he suppressed it; awe, or reverence, or fear, Vickers could not tell which. Then, without speaking, he turned and stooped through the low door of the "hoganda," a conical hut of willow withes and skins, beaten and weathered by the winds of many years on top of this mesa. As Vickers bent to follow, Fallon caught his arm.

"What was that you told him?"

"Shi-pa-pu," Vickers murmured. "The Black Lake of Tears, from whence the human race is supposed to have arisen. It's so sacred the Indians rarely say it aloud."

"And no white man is supposed to know about it?"

"I never met another who did," said Vickers. "At least the shaman knows I've been inside their hogandas before. That's all we care about."

The inside was fetid and oppressive with the same odors the shaman emanated, and Vickers shied away from a kachina doll dangling above the door, dressed and beaded and feathered to represent one of the gods. The shaman indicated that they should seat themselves about the flat Walla pai basket woven from martyinia that reposed in the centre of the "hoganda." Then the medicine man seated himself and stirred the coals of the fire before the empty basket until they glowed, lighting a weed he produced from a buckskin bag at his belt. This sacred cigarette he passed around, and while each of them puffed on it, began murmuring incantations over the dying light of the coals. It was almost pitch black inside the hut when the buckskin thong appeared, and Vickers couldn't have sworn how it got there. The shaman continued muttering, three feet away from the basket, but Fallon drew in a hissing breath, reaching toward the piece of rawhide fringe reposing in the bottom of the flat basket. Vickers caught his hand, pulling it back.

"Quimiu had an object also," said Vickers. "A feather, he said, dropped from a black-headed bird who shed her plumage in August."

"A goddess, rather," murmured the shaman, and Vickers could feel something draw him up, because he sensed it coming again, and his breathing became audible, and swifter, "a goddess sent by the Trues to prove to the Apaches what coyotes they are. Nothing they had done could subdue her. Their leader himself wished her favor, but she bit his hand when he tried to touch her. Even the dust and sun and weariness of the long ride could not hide her beauty. Her eyes were not as black as her hair, and once when she turned fully to me, it was as if I had stared into the swimming smoke of a campfire, and another time, when she looked at the leader of the Apaches, it was as if I had seen lightning. Other of the Dine, like Quimiu, have seen her, and as long as the sacred

wear is smoked in the hoganda, it will be told how the goddess rode through our land, leaving signs to the favored ones . . ."

From the corner of his eye, Vickers could see Fallon bending forward that same way, his mouth parted slightly, his wide eyes rapt. Suddenly he seemed to feel Vickers' gaze on him, and closed his mouth, leaning back, glancing almost angrily toward Vickers.

"How did you get the sign?" said Vickers, motioning toward the buckskin whang in the basket.

"The Apaches were apparently expecting to find water in the Red Lake, but it has been dry a moon, and there was none. They would not have revealed their passing to me unless they were desperate for water. They forced me to show my sacred sink on the mesa, where the sun cannot reach the water which the Rain Gods have brought and dry it up. Then they left the one named Baluno and his companion to guard me and keep me from telling of them until they were safely away."

Fallon's eyes were on Vickers now, in a covert speculation, as he spoke. "The Mogollon Kind?"

The shaman sat staring into the basket without answering Fallon. The fire had died completely now, and the light from the smokehole was rapidly fading as night fell outside, turning the hoganda into thick darkness. Vickers could barely see Redeye Reeves across the basket. He saw the man glance at him now, and there was that same speculation as Vickers had seen in Fallon's face. Vickers felt his hands tighten around the Henry across his knees. In a few moments it would be so intensely dark that none of them could see the other.

"I thought the shaman feared none but the Trues," said Vickers, and his body was stiffening for the shift.

The shaman's voice came abruptly from the gloom, almost angrily. "How do I know if it was the Mogollon Kid."

"I have heard the Indians feared the Mogollon Kid as much as their own gods," said Vickers. "He must have the power of the Trues if he can shut a shaman's mouth." Even that failed to elicit anything from the shaman. "If you can't tell us who it was," said Vickers, "perhaps you can tell us where they are bound."

Vickers had seen the incredible legerdemain of these wonder workers. Once he had seen a shaman make corn grow in the bare dirt floof of a hoganda, and it had convinced and amazed even his occidental realism. But this came so unexpectedly that it held him spellbound as it occurred. A faint blue glow descended from the smokehole of the hive-like structure, until their four figures were bathed in an eerie light, faces drawn and taut with a sudden tension. The piece of buckskin fringe was revealed momentarily in the basket, shifting like a small snake with a life of its own till it pointed due north. Then the light was extinguished abruptly. In the following blackness Vickers recovered from the sight enough to do what he had planned. Still sitting in the cross-legged position they had all assumed, he placed his hands on either side of him and shifted himself about twelve inches to the right with his legs yet crossed, speaking as he did to hide the sound.

"The sacred sign points to Tusuyan."

"Yes," said the shaman. "The Dance of the Snake is being held at Walpi this year——"

The shot thundered, rocking the "hoganda," deafening Vickers. He sat rigid with his back against the willow frame of the hut, his Henry cocked across his lap, waiting for whoever came for him. There was a shout, a muffled struggle in the utter darkness, then the hoganda shook violently. Outside, the animals had been spooked by the shot, whinneying and nickering and shaking the ground as they tore at their picket pins and galloped back and forth before the door. Vickers knew what a target anybody would be going out the door, and he sat there till silence had fallen again. Finally the spark from a flint and steel caught across the hut. He jerked his Henry that way. It was the shaman, throwing fresh juniper shavings on the dead

coals. He lit the fire and shuffled across the room to where Vickers had risen. There was no one else in the hoganda.

The shaman fingered the bullet hole in the hide wall. "It would have killed you if you'd been sitting one paso to the left," he muttered. "I wonder why they wanted you dead?"

Vickers turned toward the door. "I don't wonder why, so much, as which one."

CHAPTER FOUR

FOR centuries the region in northeastern Arizona Territory had been known as the province of Tusuyan, and the Pueblos living there as Moquis, or Hopis, from their own name for themselves, Hopitushimumu. Walpi was one of these pueblos, perched atop a sombrous mesa, a giant block of sandstone reaching up from the flatlands about it, the tiered mud houses on its top barely visible from below. It was August of the second year, and groups of Indians from the other pueblos and from the Navajo camps to the east had been passing up the trail to Walpi all day, raising nervous flurries of grey dust over the fields of corn and squash near the village.

Knowing it would be suicide to go out the door of the shaman's hogan back there above Canon Diablo, if anyone was outside, Vickers had unlashed some of the deerhides at the back, crawling out that way, only to find that both Red-eye Reeves and Webb Fallon were gone, with all the animals, including his roan. He had trailed them on foot, but being mounted they soon outdistanced him. He could read signs of someone driving Red-eye's mules on the roan, but could find no other horse prints, and concluded Fallon had not left the hoganda with Red-eye.

A week after Canon Diablo, Vickers plodded up the trail toward Walpi, behind a party of Apaches on wiry little mustangs. Ordinarily the Apaches and Navajos were enemies of the Pueblos, but during the Snake dance hostilities were suspended, and other tribes allowed to view the ceremonies. The houses atop the mesa were built three stories high, each story set back the length of one room on the roof of the lower level, forming three huge steps, with rickety ladders reaching each roof from the one below. What passed for the streets and courtyards in front of the houses were filled with a milling crowd of Indians, Moqui women in handwoven mantas holding dirty brown babies to their breasts, tall arrogant Navajo men with their heavy silver belts and turquoise bracelets, a few shifty Apaches like strange dogs, standing apart in their little groups and bristling whenever they were approached, turkey red bandanas on their greasy black hair, Sharps hugged close. Stopping near the entrance to the mesa top from the trail, Vickers was aware of their suspicious eyes on him, and an ineffable sensation of something not quite right filled him. Then a Navajo stumbled through the crowd toward Vickers, pawing at a big Bowie in his silver belt, and Vickers knew what it was.

"Pahanas," growled the Navajo, shoving a Moqui woman roughly aside, and Vickers could see how bloodshot his eyes were. A pair of Moqui braves moved in from where they had been standing beneath an adobe wall, and they were drunk, too. As Vickers opened the lever on his Henry, he saw the Mexican ratmule standing in a yonder courtyard, its aparejo pack ripped off and laying at the animal's feet, empty kegs strewn all about the hard packed ground. "Pahanas, Pahanas!" It was a shout, now, coming from a bibulous Apache, running in from the other side. Vickers had waited till the last moment, but just as he was about to bring his Henry up to cover them, someone else shouted from the rooftop of a nearby building.

"No, not Pahanas. Hopitu-shinumu. He is my blood brother."

It was Abeito, House Chief of Walpi, swinging on to one of the rawhide-bound ladders and climbing down with a quick, catlike agility He was a small compact man in white doeskin for the coming ceremony, a band of red Durango silk

about his black bobbed hair. The Moquis stopped coming at Vickers, and the Navajo moved grudgingly aside, still clutching his knife, to let the House Chief through. Vickers embraced Abeito ceremoniously, as befitted a blood brother, but he saw it in the House Chief's eyes as Abeito pulled him through the milling crowd toward his own dwelling.

"Reeves is here?" he said to Abeito. "Why did you let him sell that whisky to your people, brother? You could have stopped it."

"He didn't sell it," said the House Chief, pulling him urgently toward the ladder.

"But he must have," said Vickers, trying to understand the evasive darkness of Abeito's eyes. "The Moquenos never took things without paying. They are not Apaches. What's happening here, Abeito? You're still House Chief, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes," said the Moqui. "We can't talk here, brother."

Abeita glanced nervously at a bunch of Apaches standing near the ladder. One of them with a Colt stuck naked through a cartridge belt about his lean middle had a keg of whisky. They were watching Vickers, shifting back and forth restlessly, talking in sullen tones, and Vickers caught the name as he reached for the ladder, and stopped.

"Is that it?" he asked Abeito.

"Please, don't stop out here. Is what it?"

"You heard what they said."

"Brother, for your own good——"

"Are you afraid of him, too?" Vickers asked. "There was a youth at Hopi Buttes too afraid even to speak his name, and a shaman at Canon Diablo. If the shamans are afraid of him——"

"I am House Chief of Walpi," said Abeito, drawing himself up, "head of the Bear Clan. Never did I expect to hear such an insult from my blood brother."

"Then is that it?"

Abeito hesitated, glancing about him, face dark. "The Mogollon Kid?" he said finally.

Vickers clutched at his coat. "Is he here? The Kid. Who is he, Abeito?"

"I did not say he was here," said the Moqui, grabbing Vickers' elbow. "Brother, if you value your life, get up that ladder into my house. We can't talk out here. Only their respect for my position holds them now. They have known of your coming for days. I sent a runner out to turn you back, but he must have missed you. Please——"

The spruce ladder popped and swayed beneath Vickers' weight. On the first terrace an eagle was fluttering in an amole cage, one of the birds trapped at Hopi Buttes and brought here for the rain ceremonies, to be killed after the last Kachinas came in July, the Indians believing the eagle's spirit would carry prayers for rain to the Trues. Abeito shoved aside the heavy bayeta blanket hanging over the doorway leading into the rooms on the second level, allowing Vickers to go in first. A squaw was squatting on the floor inside before the cooking stone the Moquenos called a tooma, mixing blue corn meal with water to form a thin batter for pikama. Vickers spoke their language to some extent, but when she looked up and saw him, she said something so fast he couldn't catch it:

"He is my blood-brother," the House Chief told her. She said something else, rising from the tooma. Abeito took an angry breath and motioned toward the door. "Get out," he told her. "Get out."

When she was gone. he turned to Vickers. "You see how it is? You can't stay here. I am violating all the laws of hospitality now, but it is for your own good, brother. For weeks we have heard of your search for the black-haired woman. I knew you, and I knew sooner or later you would arrive here. She is not here, believe me."

"Then who is? " said Vickers. "What's happening? Why have you so

little control over your people? Surely it was not your wish that they took Reeves' fire-water. You know what will happen with everyone drunk like this. You have a hard enough time maintaining peace among your people and the Navajos and Apaches as it is. Why were they talking of the Mongollon Kid? Where is he?"

A man shoved aside the bayeta blanket in the doorway, stepping inside. "Here he is," he said.

Vickers had lived and travelled among the Indians long enough to acquire some facility at hiding his emotions when it was necessary, but he felt his mouth open slightly as he stared past Abeito's white doeskin shoulder at the man swaggering there in the doorway, one hand holding aside the curtain to reveal the Apaches behind him, the other hand hooked in his heavy cartridge belt near enough to the big blue Remington .44 he packed. His lean, avaricious face was scarred deeply from smallpox, and the whites of his eyes were pale shifting enigmas above the thin, mobile intelligence of his broad, thin-lipped mouth.

"Perry Papago," said Vickers emptily.

Papago grinned without much mirth, moving on in, and Combabi followed him on silent bare feet, shifty black eyes unwilling to meet Vickers' gaze, and the other Apaches blotted out the light from the door behind, the bores of their Sharps covering Vickers.

"This is why your blood brother has so little control over his people, Vickers," said Papago, tapping the short buckskin vest covering his bare chest. "I've taken over. It's for their own good. Four troops of dragoons in Prescott and more coming up as soon as the Department of Arizona can shift them. If the Indians don't organise now they'll be wiped out. The Navajos and Apaches are all ready. All we need are the Moquis now, and we'll have them as soon as the Snake Dances are over. I tried to talk sense with Abeito, but he wouldn't listen. Get his people drunk enough, and they'll listen. There are half a thousand warriors in the seven pueblos of Tusuyan, Vickers. What do you think your bluecoats can do when I add them to my Apaches?"

Vickers was bent forward, his voice intense. "You've got the girl?"

Papago's eyes raised slightly. "Girl?"

"You know, Papago. You're the Mogollon Kid? You've brought her here to this. We found your man Baluno at Canon Diablo." Vickers was trembling. "Don't try and deny it, Papago. What have you done with her? What have you done with Sherry Kern?"

Papago pursed his lips, something mocking entering his voice. "I didn't know you felt that way about her, Vickers. She must be a beautiful woman."

"Papago—"

"Brother!" Abeito caught Vickers as he lunged forward at Papago. Then he turned to the half-breed. "Let him go, Papago. He has always been our friend. Even your friend. Take me in his place. Whatever you were going to do with him, do with me."

"No," said Papago, and lifted his hand off his cartridge belt to motion at his men, and they began slipping in and moving around from behind Papago and Combabi, dark, evil Apaches, the whites of their eyes shining in the semi-gloom. "No, Abeito. I tried to stop Vickers from this at the beginning, but he wouldn't listen. As you say, he has been our friend, and I didn't want him mixed up in it. But now he has come too far. Take him!"

This last he called to his men, and there was the abrupt scuffle of feet across the hard-packed floor. Vickers tore loose of Abeito, trying to bring his Henry into line and snap down the lever all in one action. He saw Combabi go for his cap and ball, whirled that way, already seeing he would be too late, because the Indian's dragoon was free even before Vickers heard the metallic click of his cocked Henry. Then a white figure hurtled in front of Vickers,

and the thunder of Combabi's shot filled the small room. Vickers pulled his gun up in a jerky, frustrated way, till it was pointing at where Combabi had been, hidden now by the other man. Stunned, Vickers watched the man in white doeskin sink to the floor in front of him, and Combabi was visible again, his cap and ball dirtying the soft gloom with a wreath of acrid black powder smoke. Perry Papago stood to the other side, and he was looking at Abeito, sprawled now on the floor, too. Then he lifted his eyes.

"You better drop it, Vickers. My Apaches got their Sharps loaded now. You haven't got a chance."

All around him, Vickers was aware of the Indians, standing with their muzzle-loaders trained on him. He dropped the Henry, butt plate striking first, then the long barrel, and went to his knees beside Abeito. It was then he became aware of the hubbub outside. The bayeta blanket was torn aside and a Moqui brave thrust into the room, followed by a pair of principales, white-headed dignitaries of Walpi's governing body. They stopped when they saw Abeito, and other Moquis crowding in from behind stumbled against the principales. Lifting his head toward them, Vickers did not know what he was going to say, when he saw the gun in Papago's hand. It was Combabi's cap and ball, still reeking of the black powder.

"Pahanas," said Papago, waving his hand toward Vickers, then holding the gun up. "Your House Chief found the pahanas with one of your women."

"No," Vickers was surprised to hear Abeito's voice. He lifted the man's head higher, and Abeito shuddered in his arms, trying to get the words out. "He cannot . . . my blood brother cannot . . . have done . . . that," said the House Chief incoherently "The Trues sent him. He is the only one who ever befriended us. The Trues sent him . . ."

Abeito sighed deeply, and his body was a sudden, dead weight in Vickers' arms. Then the fetid smell of sweat and buckskin gagged Vickers, and rough arms were pulling him up off Abeito. He was still staring at the dead House Chief, a thin pain somewhere inside him now. They had known a lot together. It was funny he should remember that time he had caught his hand between the bed and the platen of his first press. He had wanted to cry then.

"You wanted to see the girl?" It was Papago's voice, entering Vickers' consciousness. "You'll see her now, Vickers. You thought it was the Tucson Machine? That's funny. I'm sorry it had to be this way, but you were on the wrong horse from the beginning, I guess, even about the Machine. We tried to stop you, didn't we? Other men had been sent out to find her, and I didn't go out of my way to stop them — I stopped them, but I didn't go out of my way. I wouldn't have ridden from here to Prescott to stop them the way I did you. But I knew what a mistake it would be to let you get started, Vickers. I'd already gotten here with Sherry when I got word Kern had contacted you to meet him there in that miner's shack outside Prescott. You almost made it anyway, didn't you? You came farther than anyone else ever did. You're the only living white man who knows I'm the Mogollon Kid. You won't live long enough for it to do you any good, Vickers."

They were hauling him roughly past Papago and the other Apaches now. The strange dazed emotion of seeing Abeito dead had held it back, but now the full comprehension of what had happened struck Vickers, filling him with the first impulse to struggle since Papago threw his weight against the Moquenos, managing to halt them momentarily, and turned enough to see Papago's Indian.

"Combabi," he said, and perhaps it was the utter lack of any vehemence, or emotion, in his voice which made the Indian's face pale slightly. "I'll kill you for that."

Somewhere outside the big medicine drums they called the tombes

had begun to beat. Vickers knew what it meant. The Snake and Antelope fraternities had conducted their secret rites in the estufas for eight days, fasting and purifying themselves, and now the tombes were heralding their readiness for the public dance. The floor was hard and rough beneath Vickers as he sat up. They had taken him to the eastern end of the mesa and thrown him into one of the ceremonial kivas, a room dug out of the solid rock and roofed over about a foot above the level of the ground, a ladder leading down into it from above. There was an air hole in the roof, and his eyes had been accustoming themselves to the semi-gloom, and he realised there was someone else in here. At first it was only a dim, unrecognisable figure, standing against the wall on the far side. Then he saw it was a woman and realised she had been standing there like that, watching him ever since he had come in. And finally, he recognised her.

It was like a physical blow. He felt his breath coming out audibly between parted lips. He had tried to prepare himself for it, all the way from his first knowledge of her, telling himself preconceived notions were always wrong. Yet no preconceived idea he had formed could match this, now. They had given her a split Crow skirt of buckskin to enable her to ride, and it only seemed to delineate the tall, statesque line of her body. What had Fallon said? The pride? Her white linen blouse had been smudged by dirt and torn by chaparral, but it still shone pale in the dusk.

"Who are you?" she said finally. "Why do you stare at me like that?"

He realised he had no right to let it catch at him like this, with the grief of knowing Abeito was gone still so fresh. Yet, he could not help it, and he knew, somehow, that Abeito wouldn't mind. He was still gazing at her, hardly conscious of his actions as he fished the three whangs of fringe from his leggins.

"I had a handful of them," said the woman, seeing what he held. "Several people know I possessed them. I tried to leave a trail. I thought, if they found them, somehow, they could follow me." She motioned with her hand. "You——"

"It got to be like I was following someone I'd known all my life," he said. Then he was leaning toward her, still on his knees, something intense crossing his lean face. "It can happen, can't it? I mean, without ever having seen you, it can happen, to a man, that way."

Her bosom moved faintly beneath the dirty blouse, and her eyes were still held to his. "What can happen? What way?"

"I wouldn't have believed it could happen," he said, getting to his feet. "Not without knowing you. Not without even seeing you. I tried to tell myself I was a fool. At night I'd lie there in my blankets and think about it and then laugh at myself, or try to. I couldn't really laugh, because it was happening, whether I believed it or not."

Suddenly, there seemed to be an affinity between them. Perhaps it was the way they were gazing at each other, perhaps something less physical than that. Vickers saw a growing comprehension in the woman's eyes, and she bent forward slightly, searching for something in his face, her voice barely audible, as if she feared to break a spell.

"Believed what? What was happening?"

"It started so long ago," he said. "Do you think I'm crazy? In Prescott, I guess, when the judge told me——"

"My father?"

He had hardly heard her. "I'd known of you before, of course, but only vaguely. The judge didn't tell me much. Just what you meant to him. Not even a description. But it must have started, even then. Later it was more than that. Do you think I'm crazy? A man named Fallon. He told me some. Your pride? It was like getting a glimpse of you through a window. Not much. Not enough. Enough to want more. Then an Indian boy. He told me the way you rode. About your hair

was the way he told me. They have a sensitivity to something like that no one else possesses. Just at that age. You know?"

She must have understood what he was trying to say, now. She tried to smile, and couldn't. Staring at him, her eyes were soft and smoky, and her brows were drawn together in a strange, intense way, as if she were groping to define some emotion within her.

"I know," she said finally, almost whispering.

"After that, a shaman," said Vickers. "An old man. Too old for anything like the boy. And yet, even him. Telling me about your eyes. And after I left him I wasn't even trying to laugh at myself. It can happen, can't it, that way? Do you think I'm crazy?"

She was still gazing at him, lost in it, like a child enraptured by a storyteller, and she moistened her lips, speaking almost dreamily. "No," she said, and drew a quick, soft little breath, as if faintly surprised at her own words. "No, I don't think you're crazy."

"Well," said a rough voice from the dark corner, "now that you've told the fair maiden of your undying love, maybe you'd better let her know just who you are."

Both the girl and Vickers stiffened, as if snapped from a trance. Then Vickers turned, to see the big bearded man in the long-sleeved red flannels sitting cross-legged against the far wall.

"Reeves," said Vickers stupidly.

"Yeah, little old Red-eye himself," said Reeves. "I guess I should have waited for you to come with me and help sell that rotgut, shouldn't I? Those damn Apaches took my goods and dumped me in their calaboose. What was all that shooting in the shaman's diggings at Diablo?"

"I think you know," said Vickers.

"Do I?" said Reeves slyly. "What happened to Fallon?"

"He ran out the same way you did."

When Reeves spoke, the woman had turned toward the bearded man. Now she was looking at Vickers again. "Mister Reeves said you were going to introduce yourself."

"I'll do the honors," grinned Reeves. "Johnny, this is Miss Sherry Kern. Miss Kern, meet Johnny Vickers."

All the blood seemed to drain from her face in that instant.

"Johnny Vickers," she said, and there was a loathing in her voice. "Johnny Vickers," and she spat it out the second time, pulling a handful of fringe from the pocket of her shirt, holding it out in front of her for him to see. "I was at the Butterfield station on Union Street when I heard the shot. It was just around the corner, right in front of the Courier. I was the first to reach him, and he was still alive. 'Get to Johnny Vickers,' he said, and this was in his hand——" her fingers closed spasmodically and then opened as she flung it at Vickers, taking a step backward, her mouth twisting as she wiped her hand down her skirt. "'Get to Johnny Vickers' he said, and then he died."

Vickers held out his hand, something chilling him suddenly. "You think——"

"You know what I think," she said, the words torn from her in a hollow, bitter way. "Why do you suppose I'd come to Prescott that evening? Edgar James and I were going to be married the next day!"

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DARKNESS trembled to the incessant rhythm of the tombes now, and beneath the hollow, muffled beat, the other sounds had begun, as the Moquenos and Navajos and Apaches gathered toward this end of the mesa for the dance. Vickers hunkered in bitter silence against the wall opposite Red-eye Reeves, looking neither at the bearded man nor Sherry Kern.

Sure there were hunks missing out of his fringed leggins. Every man who wore leggins cut the fringe off at some time or another when he was out without any other kind of lashings to repair his saddle or tie his duffle or a thousand other things

they could be used for. So there were hunks cut out of the fringe on his pants. And no other man, more Ute leggins around here. All right. So the Utes dyed their fringe different. All right. And so Edgar James told them to get to Johnny Vickers. The hell with it. He shifted angrily, running his tongue across dry, cracked lips. This was what he'd come for. He should have known it from the beginning. Not the way a Moqui boy looked when he described her, or the way Fallon lost himself when he talked of her. Not any of that. This.

Vickers wanted to spit and didn't have any saliva in his mouth to do it with. His head came up abruptly to the scraping noise from over by Reeves. The bearded man had stiffened; he rose to his feet, turning to face the wall, backing off toward the centre of the room. The walls were curtained with red chimayo blankets, and one of these was thrust aside. The room being sunk into the earth this way, it had never entered Vickers' head that the blankets should conceal a doorway. The portal opened behind the blankets was a heavy oak piece, set in the solid rock, and a man stood there with one hand holding the chimayo blanket back. His face was painted black to the mouth, and from there down to the neck, white. The rest of his body, naked to the waist, was a lake-red. About his square belly was a dancing skirt of wool, with fox-skins dangling behind, rattles tied to his naked ankles

"Your fate has been decided, Vickers," he said in English. "It seems Abeito tried to tell them you were sent by the Trues before he died. Otherwise they would have killed you outright. As it is, the principales have been debating, and their decision is that if you were really sent by the Gods, you can survive the Snake Dance."

Vickers was on his feet, staring at the man, and it had struck him by now. "Fallon," he said. "Welso Fallon."

Fallon shut the door quickly behind him, coming forward to be surrounded by the three of them, forgetting their hatred and bitterness in this moment enough to come together. Fallon caught at Vickers' arm.

"Not much time for explanation now. I got away from Diablo on your roan. Came across one of these Antelope Men out getting rattlesnakes for the dance. Knocked him on the head and took his outfit. That Navajo shaman said the snake dances were being held at Walpi, and the buckskin thong in the basket was pointing north. I took the chance that implied the girl had been taken here. Climbed the cliff on this south side during the night, hunted till daylight for the girl without success. In this monkey suit, I could move around the pueblo pretty free as long as it was dark. Had to hide in one of the estufas during the day. I don't speak their language, but neither do the Apaches. Some Moqueno was talking to an Apache in Spanish outside the estufa. The court where they're going to hold the dance is on a lower level than the upper part of the mesa. Guess you know this. It's where the door leads to. It's how we'll escape."

"But it's a sheer cliff on the south side of the court," said Vickers. "We'll have to go through the whole pueblo to get out."

"I didn't mean that way," said Fallon. "They'll let you all go if you survive the Snake Dance."

"That's impossible," snapped Vickers. "There's over a hundred rattlers in the ceremony. A white man wouldn't last a minute in that court."

"It's the only way. You can't fight your way through a thousand drunk Indians without even a pocketknife in your hands." Fallon turned toward the door. A tombe had begun thumping out there. He spoke swiftly "They're starting. This has to be fast. When I heard what the principales had decided and knew you were in here, I managed to get inside that cottonwood booth where they keep the snakes in a big buckskin bag. I let one out, stepped on its tail before it could coil, closed the bag on the others. Then I grabbed it behind

the head and extracted the fangs. Did the same to four others. Sweat made this paint on my face wet enough to daub a circle of it around the tail of each snake. You can't miss it. Whatever they make you do with those snakes, pick the ones with the paint on them."

"But there'll be others," said Vickers. "They have a dozen at a time crawling around that court."

"I'll see that they don't bite you," said Fallon.

The girl's face darkened. "What do you mean?"

Vickers could feel sweat dampening his face as he stood there with the girl and Red-eye, after Fallon had left without answering her. The fight going on inside Sherry was evident to him in her rigid body, her set face. He didn't blame her. He felt a fear growing in himself. There was something ghastly about the thought of that courtyard out there full of writhing, hissing snakes. Vickers reached out and touched her impulsively, and then let his hand slide off as she turned toward him. He didn't know whether the look on her face was for him, or the snakes.

The door was thrust open, and a pair of braves in the same costume as Fallon had worn entered, carrying the sacred rattles known as quajas. The design on their kilts indicated they were of the Bear Clan, and one of them told Vickers in sonorous tones of the sentence imposed upon them by the principales, then nodded his head toward the door.

Vickers took a deep breath and stepped out, followed by Sherry. A deep sighing sound went up from the crowds lining the tops of the houses on the west of the courtyard, and then a shout, as the Apaches saw the girl following Vickers. There was no ladder from the housetops into the courtyard, but Perry Papago dropped off the first roof, landing like a cat, running out to the captain of the Antelope Society where he stood with his dancers by the sacred cottonwood booth called the kee-si.

"There is no reason for the girl to be tested," he told the Moqui, and Vickers realised Papago feared her death would leave him with no hold over the troops in Prescott. "Pahanas Vickers is the only one on trial."

"They are all pahanas," said the captain. "If they are sent by the Trues, they must prove it. This is the judgment of the principales."

"No," shouted Papago. "Combabi, Assaya, Jerome—"

At his call, his Apaches began surging toward the edge of the roof, pushing through the other Indians. Combabi dropped off a house into the court, pulling his cap-and-ball. Then he stopped, with the gun held there in both hands. At the signal of the captain's hand, one of Antelope Men had swung aside the curtain of the kee-si and reached in to unlace the head of one of the buckskin bags holdings the snakes, and the first rattler slid out, hissing and writhing. Instinctively, Papago jumped back against the wall, and another big, ugly diamond-back rattler slithered from the kee-si. Combabi backed up, a twisted revulsion on his face. Perhaps it was the very primitive horror of the slimy death in these creatures that held him from firing, or perhaps that he knew how sacred the snakes were to the Moquenos, and how the whole pueblo would mob him if he dared shoot.

Behind him, Vickers heard a strangled sound. At first he thought it was Sherry, and looked toward her. But she was standing rigid beside him, a white line about her tightly shut lips, staring wide-eyed at the half-dozen huge snakes now writhing across the floor of the courtyard. It was Reeves.

"Vickers," he said hoarsely, "they ain't gonna make us dance with them snakes. Not white men. Not rattlers like that."

It surprised Vickers. He hadn't expected it from Reeves, somehow; he remembered how Reeves had gone out to get those Apaches at Canon Diablo, and how he had reacted to the gunshot wound.

"You heard Fallon," said Vickers. "He's fixed some of the snakes. It's our only way."

"No" Reeves' palms were spread out against the rock on either side of him as the Antelope Man let out another hissing snake. "No, Vickers, you're the only one on trial; Papago's right, you're the only one on trial. Ain't no reason the rest of us have to dance with those snakes. I don't see any with paint daubed on their tails. They're real, Vickers. I seen a man bit by one of them diamond-backs last year. He swelled up like a balloon" Sweat was streaking the grime in Reeves' face now, leaking down into his beard. "Tell them I don't have to do it, Vickers. Make up some excuse. You can. You know them Tell them I got a special chit from these Trues or whatever they are. I just come along. Tell them, Vickers—"

The girl was standing there like that, and a faint line of red showed across her chin, and Vickers could see now how her teeth were clamped into her bottom lip, and the sight of Reeves disgusted him suddenly. He grabbed the man's arm.

"Come on. You'll spoil it all. If we were sent by the Trues, we wouldn't act like this. They'll get suspicious, and it'll be over. You've got to trust Fallon."

"No!" Reeves tore from Vickers' grasp, a glazed look in his eyes, falling back against the stone. "Please, Vickers, get me out of this. I'll do anything else. Man or devil. I've fought 'em all in my time. Injun or white, black or yellow, man or beast. I fought a grizzly once. See? See that scar on my chin? But not this, Vickers. You can't just walk in there and start playing with them diamond-backs. They'll have you bloated like a Cimarron carcase in five minutes. Please, Vickers. Anything I'll do anything. Tell them, Vickers—"

"Shut up!" Vickers slapped him across the face, knocking his head back against the wall. The Indians were watching them now. "If you spoil our last chance here. I'll kill you myself. Now get up like a man and take it I though you were a man. Down at Canon Diablo I thought I hadn't ever seen that kind of nerve before."

"This ain't the same." Reeves was huddled back against the wall, his lower lip slack and wet. "Snakes, Vickers, snakes. It ain't the same. There's something special about them. Anything else, Vickers. I told you Anything else. Not snakes, Vickers. I seen a man bit. Anything but snakes. I didn't come for this!"

"What did you come for then?" Vickers had both hands on his shirt, shaking him savagely. "What did you come for?"

"To get the gal. You know that Get me out and I'll tell you. Get me out. I'll do anything, Vickers."

Vickers shook him again. "It was you took the shot at me back in the shaman's hoganda at Canon Diablo."

"Yeah—" Reeves wiped his slobbering mouth, struggling against Vickers' grip—"yeah. I had to wait till you found out from him where the gal was. I knew he wouldn't tell right out. That ain't Injun ways. When he said the Snake Dances was being held at Walpi, I knew. Still can't figure how I missed. You must have moved. I placed you dead centre before it got too dark. You must have moved—"

Vickers shook him again as he started babbling again. "Who sent you? The Tucson Machine?"

"Yeah, yeah." He glanced wild-eyed at the snakes again. "Get me out, Vickers, get me out. The Machine. I'll do anything. You promised. The Machine. Papago'd worked for us before. We got him to hook the girl so we'd have control over Judge Kern till the elections were over, and we were strong enough to keep the capital at Tucson. Only Papago switched ends on us and brought Sherry here for his own purpose."

"How did you get that handful of fringe from leggins?"

"Your apprentice printer." Reeves' breathing sounded like a crazed animal, hoarse, broken. "He cut a handful off when you were sleeping after a bulldog edition. Edgar James had found out about this plot to get Sherry Kern, and had to be eliminated. I guess that's what James meant when he told Sherry your

name. You'd been claiming all along the Tucson Machine was back of all the trouble in the Territory, and James had always laughed at you. It was only then he knew you were right."

Sherry had turned toward them, a dazed comprehension seeping through the other emotions twisting her face. "You mean Vickers didn't murder Edgar? Why should they try to implicate him at all?"

"I guess you haven't been in the Territory long enough to know how Vickers was fighting the Tucson Machine," said Reeves. "I guess you don't know how it is trying to get rid of a man like that."

"They tried it before?" Sherry's voice still held doubt.

"I've got a slug in my shoulder for one time," said Vickers in a flat tone "There's a dead triggerman buried out on Caliente Hill for another. I guess they got tired of doing it that way. This was sort of a two birds-with-one-stone deal, wasn't it?" He jammed Reeves back against the rock viciously. "Who was it?"

Reeves' glazed eyes rolled up to him "When we knew James had to be killed, we paid your apprentice to cut a handful of fringe off your leggins. Everybody knew how you and James had hated each other. He even made it better by saying your name the last—"

"Who was it—"

The utter savagery of Vickers' voice made Reeves stiffen. "Papago," he gasped, staring at Vickers. "We'd hired him other times Papago burned James down." Then he was staring past Vickers. "They're coming. Vickers, you promised Get me out. Get me out. I ain't gonna dance with any snakes. For God's sake!"

Vickers sensed the dancers moving in behind him, and he almost shouted the last, jamming Reeves against the wall. "Who's the top saddle in the Machine, Reeves? Who runs the whole thing? You know. Tell me, tell me "

"No Vickers, no!" Reeves began fighting with a sudden bestial fear, screaming and writhing against the rock, tearing at Vickers' face, lurching out of his grasp. "Don't let them, Vickers. I ain't going to dance with no snakes No, Vickers, no—"

Vickers was torn aside from behind, and two Antelope Men caught Reeves, pulling him to his feet. Reeves was a big man, his fear giving him a violent strength, and he lunged forward with a scream, fighting loose. Another pair of Mogollons caught him, and the four dancers shoved the shouting, fighting man out toward the snakes. When they were near the writhing mass of reptiles, they gave Reeves a last shove. He stumbled forward, unable to catch himself till too late. Already three of the snakes were coiled The thump the first one made, striking, was carried clearly to Vickers. Reeves scream was hardly human. Kicking the snakes away, he whirled blindly, but another diamondback whirred and struck. The big man jerked with that hammer blow against his thigh He tore at the bullet head, whirling and bawling in a frenzy of fear.

"Vickers, get me out. You promised, damn you, promised. Get me out I ain't going to dance with no snakes Vickers, Vickers, Vickers . . ."

The words ended in a crazy scream as another snake hit him. They were all about him now, hissing and rattling and coiling, and he turned this way and that, kicking wildly with his feet, roaring in a terrible fear. Vickers was held spellbound by the ghastly spectacle, filled with a wild impulse to rush in and drag the man out of it, repelled by a growing horror of the snakes. Twice he made a spasmodic move toward Reeves, and the Antelope Men caught his arms Sherry was watching with terrified eyes, bosom rising and falling violently beneath her blouse.

"Vickers, please, Vickers, Vickers . . ." Reeves' shouts became weaker, and he made a last attempt to turn away from the snakes, arms held across his face, and another rattler struck him, almost knocking him over. He sank to his knees, his cries hoarse, pitiful, shaking and blubbering He tried to crawl out on his hands and knees. Another snake coiled before him, hissing, rattling Reeves let out a last hoarse scream,

rising almost to his feet, turning wildly away. He shuddered to its blow, falling down again.

He sank on to his belly, his soft blubbering become incoherent, finally stopping, to lie there, a great hulk of a man in his levis and red flannels, utterly silent.

Two Antelope Men walked out to get him. A rattler struck at one of them, and he kicked the snake away casually, stooping to lift Reeves. They carried him back past Vickers into the room from which they had come.

Vickers caught himself abruptly, moving over till Sherry was against his side, catching her cold hand. "You've got to trust Fallon. It's our last chance, Sherry. It was the panic got Reeves. Not the snakes. A man doesn't die that fast from their bite. Maybe fear makes the venom work faster. I don't know. All I know is you can't let it get you like that. Fallon said he'd get us out. Do you hear me, Sherry?"

"I hear you, Vickers." Her voice was small, shaky. She was trembling against him and her fingers dug into his palm till the nails brought blood. Then a tombe began to beat from the nearby rooftop.

In front of the kee-si was a pit dug in the ground, supposed to represent Shi-pa-pu, the Black Lake of Tears, and the twenty men of the Antelope Society began circling this, shaking their guajes. Then a huge tombe on the rooftop nearby began to beat, and the men of the Snake Society emerged from the sacred estufa at the north end of the court. The captain of the Snake Order, upon reaching the first snake, tickled it with a feather as it started to coil, making it stretch out, then snatched it behind the head and put it between his teeth. A man of the Antelope Society placed his arm around the Snake man's shoulders, and together they started in the peculiar hippety-hop toward the sacred dance rock at the south end of the court. Each Snake Man in turn took his snake, and was joined by his Antelope partner. As the third pair left the kee-si together, an Antelope Man emerged from the booth behind them, so close that Vickers was sure he alone saw it, the Indians on the rooftops probably not even aware the man had not been there all the time, the dancers too busy with their rituals to notice where he came from. There were seventeen of the Snake Order, and twenty of the Antelope, and when they had all paired off, it left three Antelope Men to gather up the snakes as each pair of dancers rounded the sacred dancing rock and came back, the Snake Man dropping his reptile with a twist of his head. The snakes were writhing and twisting madly in the Moquenos' mouths now, trying desperately to strike the Indians, all their leverage for striking dissipated by the position in which they hung. The captain of the Snake Order had already rid himself of his first snake, and standing by the kee-si with his partner, rattled his ceremonial guaje at the whites, calling something.

"What did he say?" Sherry's voice was hoarse.

"He's ordering us to pick up a snake and dance with it in our mouth," said Vickers.

Suddenly the girl's body was shuddering violently. Her teeth showed white against her red lower lip, drawing blood and her voice shook with the terrible effort she was making to control herself.

"I can't do it," she said. "I can't, I can't . . ."

"You've got to," said Vickers tensely. The Antelope man who had come from the booth was separating a big diamondback from three other reptiles on the courtyard floor. He reached in with both hands to grab the diamondback behind its head with both hands before it could coil. Vickers saw a smaller sidewinder coil and strike, and saw the man flinch and grit his teeth.

Fallon. Dressed in the bizarre costume, Fallon moved toward them, holding the leaping diamondback, two red dots on his right hand. Sweat was streaking the black paint on his face.

"Take it," he told Sherry under his breath. "It's the one I fixed. Take it."

Sherry stumbled backward, her hands out in front of her, face pale. Vickers clamped his teeth shut and grabbed the snake in one hand behind the head, just beneath Fallon's grip, tearing it from him. He caught Sherry by the arm, pulling her violently to him, then caught her abundance of black hair and held her head rigid, her body against him, and jammed the seven feet of leaping serpent against her face. She screamed, and for that moment her face was twisted in utter horror. Then he felt her stiffen against him, and her eyes were staring wide and suddenly free from fear into his, and it was as if she took the strength from him.

Her mouth opened, and he forced the snake between her teeth, and she bit into the slick diamond-marked hide so hard the tail and head leaped into the air, the circle of paint Fallon had daubed on its body near the rattles gleaming wetly. An Antelope Man put his arm around Sherry and guided her toward the dancing rock in that strange hippety-hop.

Fallon had already chosen another marked snake for Vickers. Vickers felt a moment of sick revulsion and closed his eyes as he took the snake from Fallon's hand, jamming it into his mouth. It tasted wet and acrid and sandy all at once, and he almost gagged on it. The fetid arm of a sweating Antelope Man was thrown around his shoulder, and they hopped toward the dancing rock. The snake beat against him, sending waves of nausea through his whole body, and he knew an unsupportable desire to vomit.

But as he turned the dancing rock with the stinking partner, he saw the real danger ahead of them. The snakes which the other pairs had dropped were slithering across the courtyard between the rock and the kee-si, and though the three Antelope Men relegated to that job kept picking them up and putting them into the cottonwood booth, there were always some snakes left on the ground.

Sherry and the Antelope man who was dancing with her were almost to the kee-si, when she dropped the snake from her mouth. It slithered away, and she tried to disengage herself from the Antelope Man. Vickers could see it now, and almost upset the man hopping with him as he tried to reach Sherry. One of the diamondbacks had freed itself from the writhing mass on the floor within the circle of dancers, slithering directly toward Sherry and her partner, and it had no paint daubed on its tail.

Vickers dropped his own snake, fighting free of his partner, leaping toward her, as the diamondback reared up, and coiled. Sherry screamed, scratching the face of her partner, but he caught her hand, ignoring the coiling snake to pull her toward the kee-si and get another serpent. A sob escaped Vickers as he saw he would be too late. The diamondback's head disappeared in a blur of movement. Vickers shouted in a hoarse, cracked way, still running forward. Then he saw what had happened. Somehow, another Antelope Man had gotten in between Sherry and the snake in that last instant, and the serpent fell back from striking the man's leg.

"Fallon," gasped Vickers between his teeth, and suddenly understood what the man had meant back in the kiva. I'll see that they don't bite you.

Again the Moquenos made them take snakes in their mouths, and again it was Fallon who managed to be the one handing them the serpent, picking out the ones marked with the paint. This time Sherry took it herself. She was sobbing and her hands were shaking, but she took the ugly reptile, making a choked sound as she forced it into her mouth, and started dancing toward the rock again. Fallon caught a snake for Vickers, stagged towards him. The man's face was turned muddy by sweat mixing with the black paint, and he fell against Vickers, gasping.

"We're doing it, we're doing it. If she can only hang on one more time. Three times around, see——"

"Why?" Vickers asked him. "Why, Fallon?"

"My job, isn't it?" panted Fallon, shoving him. "I'm all right. Got hold of some of that tea they call Mah-que-he. Antelope Men drink it to give them immunity. Kern sent me out to get her, didn't he?"

"This isn't your job," said Vickers, fighting with the writhing snake in his hands. "A man wouldn't do this just for a job. You knew what it meant. You knew that Mah-que-he wouldn't give you immunity. These Snake Men train all their lives. They've been drinking that tea eight days now. You knew what it meant. Why, Fallon?"

Fallon whirled to face him fully, those wide eyes meeting his, a little crazy now. "You know why! You came for the same thing. Even when I met you there in the Tortillas. It had already happened to you. Just hearing about her. I knew her, see. You just heard about her. and it happened to you. I knew her. That's why!"

The tombe stopped. A hush fell over the throng on the walls, and the sweating dancers halted, drawing together in front of the kee-si. The captain of the Snake Order held up his guaje, turning toward the four quarters, then bowing to Vickers.

"Abeito spoke the truth. No Pahanas has ever passed the ordeal before you. The Trues have sent you."

Vickers had a chance to speak with Fallon, grabbing his arm when they passed him going out. "You're coming with us. If you can't get away now, we'll wait for you below."

"Don't be a fool," said Fallon. "I can't leave till the dance is over. They'd suspect something."

"Fallon——"

"No!" The man jerked away, his face twisted. "This tea's about through working in me anyway. You know that. What's the use of risking your life for a dead man? I did this for her. You get her back. Promise me that?"

Vickers drew a heavy breath. "I promise you that."

"Now get the hell out of here!"

They gave Vickers his Henry back, and the roan Fallon had taken at Canon Diablo, and another horse for Sherry. The Moquenos watched them pass down the street, sullen and silent, and Vickers could see how many of them were still drunk on Reeves' whisky. He was practically holding Sherry up, and as they neared the start of the trail down, leading their horses, he felt her grow taut against him, and he saw it too.

They were strung out across the trail, a dozen or more, with their narrow, drunken faces and glittering eyes, and .50 Sharps, and Papago stood out in front of them. "You aren't taking the girl, Vickers. Hand her over and you can go."

"I'm taking her, Papago. You heard the decision of the principals. You'll be bucking more than me if you try to stop us."

"The Moquenos won't interfere," said Papago. "You see how drunk they are. They'd just as soon see you dead as not, after the way you messed up their Snake Dance. Now hand her over."

"It won't stop with me," said Vickers. "There's still the Tucson Machine. Do you think Reeves will be the last man they send up here?"

"As a matter of fact," said Papago, "I do."

"You're dreaming," said Vickers.

"No," said Papago. "You wanted to know who sat the top saddle in the Tucson Machine? A strong man, Vickers. The kind of man who could go out and do something himself when his men failed."

The implication of that surprised Vickers enough to take him off-guard, and his incredulity was in his voice. "Are you trying to say that Reeves——"

"Was the head of the Tucson Machine. He'd sent half a dozen of his men out to find the girl before he finally got impatient and came himself. He was that kind, Vickers. Almost as dangerous as you. And now that he's gone, Kern won't have much trouble shifting the capital back to Prescott and smashing the

Machine for good." Papago shifted impatiently. "I'm through talking. Come through alone and we'll let you do it standing up."

"You're bluffing, Papago," said Vickers, "you don't dare defy the edict of the principales if you want them to help you against the troops. We're coming through."

He put one hand behind Sherry's back, guiding her forward, but with his first move, Papago went for his gun. "This is how we're bluffing, Vickers."

Vickers had not really believed they would try it, here. He could have brought his own Henry up and cocked it about the same time Papago got the Remington out, but that would have left Sherry in the line of fire.

With a grunt, he threw himself against the girl, not even trying for his own gun, and the two of them went down, rolling into the dark doorway of the adobe house on this side, the roar of gunfire echoing down the street as Papago and the Apaches opened up.

The wall cut him off from most of the Apaches, but he could still see two of them out there. He snapped the lever on his Henry, and it bucked in his hand, and one Apache yelled and doubled over, dropping his Sharps. A new volley of gunfire rocked the narrow way, and bullets made their deadly thud into the mud walls all about Vickers. But there were only one or two Apaches beside Papago with six-shooters, and the others had those old single-shot Sharps. The sudden cessation of gun-sound told him they had emptied their guns and had to take that moment for reloading, and he knew it would be his only chance.

"There's only one way to finish this," he muttered.

"Papago?" said Sherry.

He turned to see her face, pale and drawn in the dark, staring up at him. "Indians are like that, Sherry. Get their leader and all the sand will go out of them."

"Vickers, you can't go out there——"

"I can," said Vickers. "While they're busy with me, you get out of here and back down the street to the principales. They'll keep their word about letting you go."

"Vickers—"

But he was already throwing himself out the door with his Henry held across his belly, an adamantine cast to his lean, burned face, his mouth twisting as he saw the first Apache skulking down the wall across the street, and fired. The man jerked against the wall, still trying to jam a fresh load down his Sharps, then fell forward on to his face. A figure loomed on the roof of the first level across the street, and Vickers realised they had been trying to come up on him inside the house that way. The man had a six-gun and began firing wildly, with both hands, and only then did Vickers recognise him. The Henry made its single hollow boom.

"I told you, Combabi, I told you," shouted Vickers, still going forward down the street, as Combabi pitched head foremost off the roof, and then Vickers' eyes swung to the man farther down in the middle of the street. He had been trying to work down next to the wall while Vickers was inside, but as soon as Vickers showed, he had moved into the centre. It was some distance, and Papago did not fire as most Indians would have. He moved toward Vickers without increasing his speed, bent forward a little. Vickers was still turning from firing at Combabi, and he snapped the lever home hard, and the gun bucked hot against his belly. Papago did not jerk, and Vickers knew he had missed. Then Papago's Remington spoke.

Vickers had been shot before, and the hammer blow against his leg was no new sensation. The street seemed to drop from beneath him, and he found himself on his belly with the Henry pinned under his body, a terrible swimming pain robbing him of all volition. Through a haze he saw Papago still coming forward, lining up the gun for another shot. Then it was Sherry's voice.

"Vickers!"

Something inside him grew taut and hard and clear. He pulled the gun upward till the barrel lay beneath his chin, snapping the cylinder out sideways beneath him. Papago saw it and tried to stop him, firing sooner than he had intended. The hard earth kicked up in a puff of acrid, blinding dust before Vickers' eyes. He squeezed the trigger that way.

When the dust fell and the stunning force of the bullet striking earth so near to Vickers left him, he could see Papago lying on his belly down the street. The Apaches were already beginning to gather about their leader, forgetting Vickers. One of them had a surprised look on his face. Then it was Sherry's hands on Vickers, soft, cool, somehow, lifting him up. The pain in his leg made him dizzy.

"Help me on the roan," he said between gritted teeth. "We've got to get out. It's all over now."

She helped him up against the horse, her arms around his body. "In a way it's over, Vickers, but in a way it's just begun," she said. "I told you I didn't think you were crazy, back in that room. You were right. It can happen, that way, to a man." And her eyes were soft and smoky, meeting his. "Or a woman."

THE END

His enemies wore gaudy uniforms. But Ike Eisenhower can tell you that's not what puts your name on a mountain.

MEN IN BUCKSKIN

By Brett Austin

THE AMERICANS in California in 1845 had long suffered under strict Mexican rule. They wanted their adopted land to break with the Mexican government and become an independent state. But eight hundred Mexican soldiers, under the leadership of General Castro, were stationed at Yerba Buena, now known as San Francisco. Their motto was, "We will kill every American in California."

When John C. Fremont heard of this, he called his men together. They were hardy men—members of the buckskin legion who settled the West—but he had few of them. Despite their small numbers they went against Sonoma, a strong Mexican garrison, and took it in bloody fighting. Then, daringly, they moved against General Castro's Mexican troops at Yerba Buena and drove them from their fort.

General Castro was surprised. A handful of Americans, wearing buckskin, carrying long rifles, had scattered his best troops. He ordered a retreat. For six days, Fremont and his men followed the fleeing Mexicans, driving them into Baja California, Mexico. The Golden State was free to choose its own rule.

"Well," said John Fremont, "they didn't exterminate me."

John Fremont was not a big man. His shoulders were wide, his body wiry—and a strong will guided destiny.

He was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1813. Little is known about his boyhood. But, by the time he was twenty-six, he was a lieutenant in the United States Army Engineers. He had a dry sense of humor and he liked a good joke.

Soon after he became a lieutenant, the government made him the head of an exploring expedition sent out to find a good route to California. He went up the Platte River, followed the north fork of the Platte to Fort Laramie. There he ran into Indians.

This was the country of the Gros Ventres, the Sioux, and the Cheyenne. They were on the warpath. Fremont and his men had a little trouble—a few Indians were killed—but they went through without personal loss. They reached the summit of the Rockies and Fremont, scaling a peak, attained the highest point of the great mountain range—13,590 feet above sea level. Today, this peak is known as Fremont Peak.

Although many other explorers—Jim Bridger among them—claim to have discovered Great Salt Lake, the official recognition as the inland lake's founder goes to John Fremont. He and his party are credited with being the first white men to spend a night beside its salt-laden waters.

That winter, he and his party were snowed in on the High Sierras. For two weeks they struggled with ice and snow and blizzards, some six thousand feet above sea level. Mules froze to death, and were used for meat. Men suffered from frozen ears despite their coonskin and muskrat skin caps. Frost-bitten cheeks turned black and peeled. Their Indian guide, understanding that they intended to cross the Sierras in the dead of winter, deserted them. But finally they reached the American Fork of the Sacramento River, and on March 6 they arrived at Sutter's Fort.

They were the first white men to cross the Sierra Nevadas.

John C. Fremont, the Pathfinder,

had the distinction of being the first to do many things. In addition to being the first to see Salt Lake, to cross the Sierras, he was also the first Republican candidate for president of the United States. This was in the campaign of 1856. He was defeated by James Buchanan.

Perhaps this was just as well, for Fremont was no politician. He was a man of the plains, the mountains; a man on horseback. No doubt, had he been elected, he would have served his country faithfully and well. But the political swirl, the endless monotony of days spent between four walls and under a roof, would have been tedious to say the least.

Kit Carson was one of his best friends. Carson guided for Fremont, and there was a great bond between the guide and explorer. Carson was with him when they first saw Great Salt Lake. That winter, Carson returned to Taos, New Mexico, where he bought a sheep ranch. The next spring, word came to him that Fremont wanted him to guide for him again.

Carson sold his sheep ranch at a great loss, and hurried to Bent's Fort where he met Fremont, At this time, Fremont had forty men with him. These forty men freed California from Mexican domination.

After he had driven the Mexicans from California, he was military governor of that territory. Later, he was chosen civil governor. For a while, in 1861, he was in command of the western Union Army.

Wild Bill Hickok, that fearless son of the plains, became a great friend of Fremont when war came in 1861. Fremont, by then a general, was stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, wanted Wild Bill, already known as a great leader and gunfighter, to be brigade waggon-master of Fremont's men, who were going to move against the Confederates.

"You tell John Fremont," said Wild Bill, looking up at the mounted soldier who had brought him the request, "that I'll be ridin' into his camp jus' a jump behin' you."

Wild Bill, then in his prime, was six-foot one. His long hair fell in ringlets over his powerful shoulders. John Fremont and he went through some tough battles in the war to follow. Once, while moving a train of provisions between Fort Leavenworth and Sedalia, Missouri, a swarm of guerrillas fell on them. Quite a fight followed. Finally, the troops drove the raiders off, saving the supplies.

"How many did you kill, Wild Bill?" asked General Fremont.

Wild Bill smiled. "Enough," he admitted.

Fremont was governor of the territory of Arizona from 1878 to 1881. He was appointed a major-general in 1890 and placed on the retirement list.

He died that same year. Death ended his career. The man in buckskin went to his last resting place.

THE END

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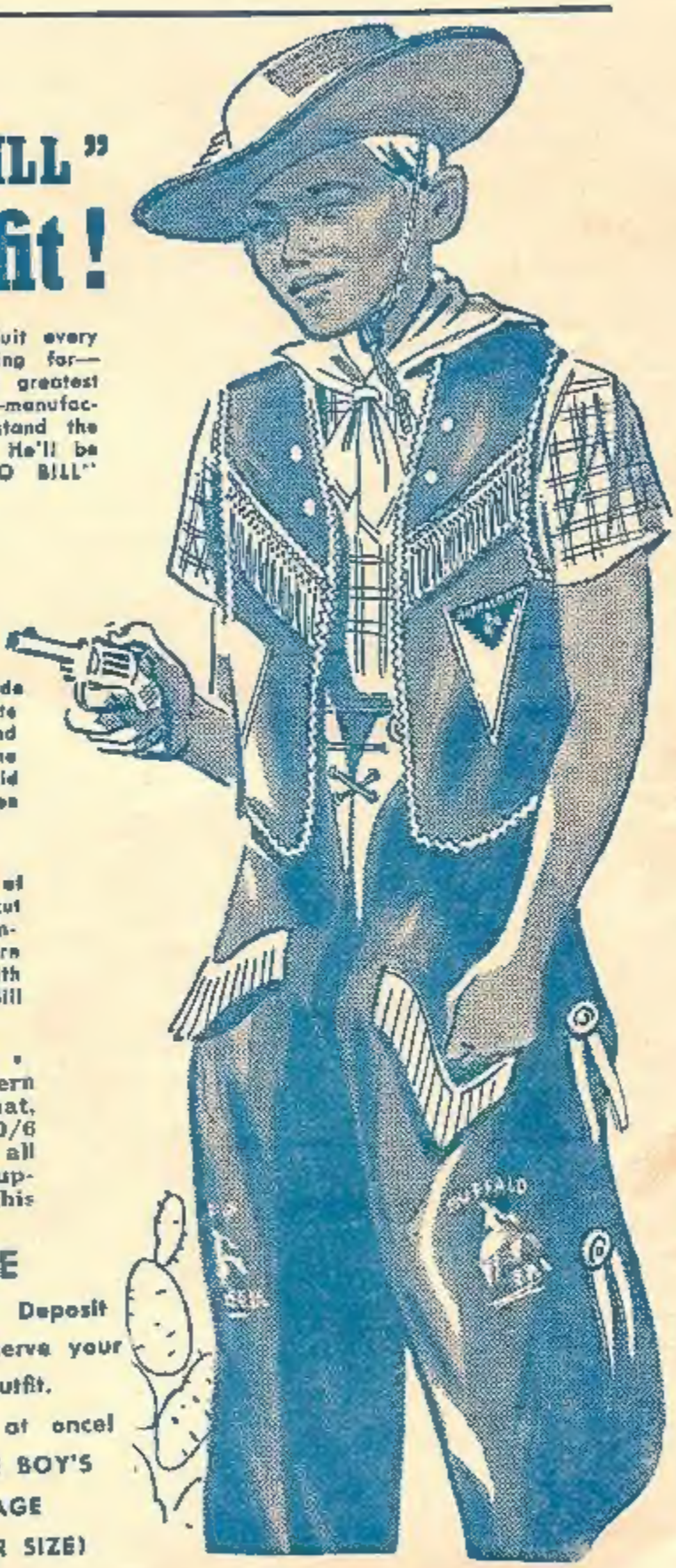

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